

Student Self-Management in Adult ESL

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Most Adult ESL students have the desire and potential to rely on themselves and meet their own needs. To this end, adult ESL students, particularly those who seek an English professional or para-professional role, can benefit from the opportunity to “bridge” from traditional language learning to actual involvement in English community processes. This article will look at one way for students as a group to meet some of their own needs, and at the same time improve their ability to communicate and function in this society. It will be exemplified by a non-profit organization made up entirely of adult ESL students.

The underlying principle is derived from Karl Krahnke’s (1987) concept of a *task-based syllabus*. He suggests that tasks are “activities with a purpose other than language learning”, but tasks are approached in a manner that fosters language development. Tasks are normally things that a learner needs to do anyway, such as applying for government health insurance, getting a driver’s licence, choosing a daycare centre, applying for a job, completing income tax returns, writing papers for classes other than ESL, or gathering information on college job training. The purpose of the lesson is completing the task. Language learning is incidental. (Krahnke, 1987)

This task-based approach has been applied at the Central Public Adult ESL Program, a community ESL programme that operates five hours per day, five days per week in Brampton, Ontario. The student body includes many different ethnic groups, full- and part-time students, and all levels of English proficiency. Krahnke’s thesis suggests that students in the Central programme could simultaneously serve themselves and learn ESL in accordance with the task-based learning concept.

I proposed to my Advanced class that a student organization be formed to 1) advise staff on what and how they should learn, 2) operate projects like social events, the coffee stand, a student library, a bookstore, a babysitting service, or a newsletter, and 3) take political action such as lobbying Bell Canada for a pay-phone in our building. The students were most interested in the special projects because of the convenience and savings that would result.

The organization was also justified to the students as a learning activity.

They could 1) gain real experience in management and the political process, 2) overcome the language transfer barrier (adult learners often have difficulty applying their classroom learning to their everyday speech and writing), 3) have greater variety in their lessons, and 4) acquire personal satisfaction and greater self-esteem. After a thorough discussion, they decided to proceed.

The students set up and ran an election, complete with rules, a schedule, nominations, a campaign, secret balloting, and impartial scrutiny. Even before the election, the students began preparing the agenda and minutes of each meeting. During the seven month period after the election, the students 1) held eight executive meetings (during Advanced class sessions), 2) assumed responsibility for the coffee stand, 3) introduced the sale of snacks, 4) purchased and resold textbooks to students on a non-profit basis (they used the school's name when ordering to get the best possible price), 5) arranged student telephone privileges in the adjacent office, 6) published two newsletters (The High Advanced Reading & Writing class chose to become the Newsletter Committee), 7) organized two end-of-term parties (The High Beginner class coordinated the first one and the High Intermediate class handled the second), 8) arranged office space for themselves, 9) named the organization *The Brampton Adult ESL Association*, 10) formed a committee to organize a babysitting co-operative among the students who are parents (this plan was eventually abandoned because of a requirement for liability insurance), 11) raised \$526.55, 12) bought a set of dictionaries for the school as a classroom resource, and 13) planned the Association's transition to the next schoolyear. It seems that the student organization has become an on-going "task-based syllabus across the curriculum".

There are several advantages to this type of instruction: 1) This type of learning cannot fail to transfer from the classroom to real life because the two are never separated. 2) Students can learn cognitive, cultural, and life skills as well as language. 3) This approach usually requires interaction with the society outside the classroom. 4) Students are highly involved in this student-centred learning; teacher-centred instruction is avoided. There was an additional unanticipated dividend: the students' sense of ownership and commitment in the programme increased significantly. A word of caution though: Task-based instruction can be difficult to put in place if students or teachers expect a more traditional approach. It is also difficult to evaluate. Further, such non-structural learning can contribute to fossilization of errors if overused with beginner or even intermediate students. (Krahnke, 1987)

The Central programme's student organization illustrates one way that instruction can be based on tasks, but since this method like all others,

has shortcomings, the staff at Central treat it as a complement to more traditional methods. The overall programme is eclectic, drawing useful ideas together from various methods.

How the Teacher Fits In

Krahnke (1987) suggests that a teacher only teaches what he or she knows. Since ESL teacher training does not include business management, some ESL teachers may feel ill-prepared to use a set of business tasks. Therefore, for those who might like to introduce student self-management in their own programmes, a practical outline is provided here of how to implement it. As in teaching, there is no one correct way to conduct business, but the following outline constitutes a viable model typical of non-profit organizations.

How to Launch an Organization

Propose forming an organization to a group of your students. Persuade the students that the organization is desirable. In other words, sell the idea. Your argument can be based on two types of advantages.

- 1) Organized students can do some things for themselves that they cannot do individually.
- 2) By organizing, students will learn North American business culture and language.

The decision to proceed or not belongs to the students. Therefore, their involvement through discussion is essential. The teacher's responsibility is to foster that discussion. At this stage, the teacher is essentially the chairperson, and can demonstrate the role by handing out copies of the agenda, and chairing the meeting.

Once the students decide to proceed, they are a *steering committee*. Ordinarily a community group like this is managed by an elected executive council. The steering committee is not an elected executive; their mandate is limited to setting up the organization. The steering committee's immediate task is to run an election of executive officers so that further decisions can be made on behalf of the student body.

How to Operate an Executive

The executive officer with overall responsibility is usually called the president (although chairperson, director, manager, etc. are possible). This person must prepare the agenda for, and chair each meeting, and ensure that decisions of the organization are executed. The president should try to delegate most specific tasks to avoid being overloaded with work.

Many executive councils have a vice-president or president-elect who

assists the president, substitutes for the president if necessary, and/or learns the president's role in order to assume it in the future.

Every meeting must have a recorder. Executive councils commonly have a permanent recording secretary responsible for taking minutes and distributing them to executive members. The related task of receiving and sending correspondence may be handled by the president, a secretary (responsible for minutes and letters), or a corresponding secretary (distinct from the recording secretary).

If the organization handles any money, even if it is only coffee or postage, then a treasurer will be required. The treasurer should report the financial situation to the executive regularly. It is possible to combine this role into secretary-treasurer.

Some organizations also have a membership secretary. Representatives of sub-groups are also possible, for example, class representatives, or liaisons with other groups.

Executive members whose responsibilities are not specified in advance are known as members-at-large. A member-at-large typically accepts a specific task when it arises, such as buying coffee supplies, or drafting a letter.

When a specific task requires more than one person, but does not require the involvement of the full executive, it is normal to form a committee to handle the task. A *standing committee* runs permanently, for example to operate a library. An *ad hoc committee* has a specialized purpose such as arranging an end-of-term party, and may disband when the task is completed.

A committee, like an executive council, requires leadership. A committee chairperson might be appointed by the executive, or be selected by the committee members from among themselves. Since committees often have a small number of members, it is possible to share leadership among its members.

Pitfalls

The Association did not operate without problems. The executive faced but overcame several:

- 1) Students sometimes did not participate fully in executive meetings due to low comprehension. It was discovered that standard voting procedures (motion, seconding, discussion, vote) worked better than decision-making by consensus because formalized motions (written on the blackboard) were easier to understand than free-wheeling dialogue, and the act of voting involved everyone in the process. However, there is a trade-off. According to David Cole (1985), voting fosters division and adversity whereas decision-making by consensus builds unity and

cooperation. Perhaps a blend of the two strategies would reduce the shortcomings of both.

- 2) Sometimes students were reluctant to join committees. General inquiries like "Does anyone want to work on the refreshment committee?" usually got little response in a large group. These non-responses gave the impression that the jobs were undesirable, and enthusiasm suffered. To prevent this tendency, students were individually asked which committee they would like to try, or which tasks they were interested in. The response was much more positive. (Another possible mechanism for committee membership is students' simultaneous submission in writing of their first and second preferences.) We found that new students often benefitted from observing different committees before joining one. A promise that they could try a committee and still switch later if they wished was reassuring to students.
- 3) Human resources can be over-extended. It is possible for an executive to be unrealistically ambitious. During one term, the executive established more committees than it could adequately staff, and some goals were not achieved. The solution was to suspend some of the committees until personnel became available.

Teaching Suggestions

It is desirable that all members of a class participate in committees. (For the purpose of this discussion, the executive may be treated as one of the organization's committees.) One class may consist of one or several committees. The teacher may present an analysis of committee roles (chair, recorder, or member-at-large), a few points at a time. He or she may have various students act as chairperson or recorder in their committee, paying special attention to the role requirements just taught. After the meeting, the student chairperson (or recorder or member-at-large) should assess his or her performance. (If a VCR and camera are available, a videotape of the meeting allows students to view themselves more objectively.) Students are usually very critical of themselves in front of their classmates. It is extremely important that the teacher highlight what the student did well. Comments from other students should only come after the student has criticized him- or herself. In this way students retain their self-esteem because the other students will also be more positive.

Among other issues and ideas the Brampton Adult ESL Association has considered are: setting up a babysitting service, a library, a lunch-hour games room, mailslots in the school for its members, buying appliances (refrigerator, microwave) and/or classroom equipment and texts, starting an emergency translation service to assist local social agencies, applying for supporting grants from government, and soliciting funding from service

clubs for a photocopier and other equipment for the programme. With a little guidance from their teachers, many groups of adult ESL students are capable of managing most of the tasks that adult native speakers handle in similar circumstances.

REFERENCES

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